THE INVITATION
March 18, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

"*Just as I am*... Though the words sound lachrymose to many, for me they still convey a sense of comfort and assurance. Was I really acceptable to God 'just as I am?' Was it really true that I needed no improvements, no alterations, that I could enter the presence of the most high, the terrifying *mysterium tremendum* just as I am? If true, that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded of my shortcomings and defects. But God accepted me just as I am? That was not judgment but good news. Years later when I read Paul Tillich's famous sermon 'You Are Accepted' I could hear the melody of the old hymn still humming on in the back of my mind."

Harvey Cox
Just As I Am

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 14:15-24

"Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."
Luke 14:23 (NRSV)

Dear God, we come out of our aloneness, knowing that here we are welcome. We come because we have heard that there is a place for us at the table of your kingdom. Sometimes, O God, we don't really believe that. Sometimes it feels like we are on the outside looking in at your people. Startle us this morning with the clear word of your grace. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou biddest me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Harvey Cox, distinguished professor of theology and very popular teacher at Harvard, author of many important books, chose the old revival hymn "Just as I Am" as the title for a memoir he wrote about his personal faith.

Cox's faith journey, which led him to one of the most prestigious theological faculties in the world, began modestly in a small Baptist church in Malvern, Pennsylvania.

He explains that "Just as I Am" is the "Invitation Hymn" in a revival service, sung right after the sermon,

> when a life without God and hell's terror's have just been vividly painted and the doors are opened to accept Christ and be saved. The "Invitation" is given. And now with every head bowed and every eye closed, the preacher or visiting evangelist urges those in the congregation who have not yet made their decision for Christ to come forward. The organ plays "Just as I Am." The choir sings too, "without one plea / But that thy blood was shed for me."

And then the mature theologian reflects with respect and affection:

> Though the words may sound lachrymose to many, for me they still convey a sense of comfort and assurance. Was I really acceptable to God 'just as I am'? Was it really true that I needed no improvements, no alterations, that I could enter the presence of the Most High, the terrifying mysterium tremendum (as I later learned to say) just as I am? If true, that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded—or so it seemed to me—of my shortcomings and defects.
>
> I was never good at football or basketball. Someone else played the saxophone sweeter than I did. Most of the girls seemed to prefer other guys for dates. Although I did fairly well in my classes,

> there was always someone, usually one of the girls, who got a higher score on the exam. Both my parents seemed to love me unconditionally but like all kids, I sensed behind their expression of affection a lot of hopes and expectations I was not sure I could live up to.
>
> But God accepted me just as I am? That was not judgment but good news. Years later, when I read Paul Tillich's famous sermon entitled "You Are Accepted," I knew exactly what it meant, and I could hear the melody of the old hymn still humming on in the back of my mind. (*Just as I Am,* pp. 151-152)

Just as I am. O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Resonating throughout the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is an amazing and radical announcement. God, the creator of all that is, the mysterious life beyond all life whose name is so holy it is never pronounced, God wants nothing so much of us as our presence at the banquet table, wants nothing of us so much as our acceptance of divine love, wants nothing of us so much as that we should allow that accepting love to recreate us, renew us, and redeem us so thoroughly that we actually begin to live it in all our relationships.

It is a message unlike any other. What God wants of us is not moral perfection, but perfect love. What God wants is not to judge and condemn, but to see our joy and hopefulness, our own lives of justice and love and acceptance. Often that message is contained in an invitation to a meal.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, to an exiled community of Jews in exile trying to figure out what went wrong, what they did that so infuriated God, what they needed to do to get back into God's good graces—to that lonely, oppressed community, the prophet issued an invitation:

> Ho, everyone who thirsts. . . . Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
> . . . Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. . . . For you shall go out in joy . . .; the mountains and the hills . . . shall burst into song.

God's people are invited to a banquet—to celebrate with songs of joy and thanksgiving because their God is a God not of angry judgment and punishment, but a God of mercy and compassion and love.

The theme continues down through the centuries, always in counterpoint to human religion, which keeps urging people to try harder, to do and be more to placate the gods, to impress God, to win God's favor, until the message, the invitation, is issued in a person, the life of one who lives like it, who does not judge and condemn but accepts and welcomes, one who tells stories about it.

Tells a story of a great banquet to which the host had invited guests. In that time and place formal dinners required two invitations: an initial invitation to announce that the dinner was going to happen and you were invited and then, given all the difficulties of food procurement and preparation, a second invitation announcing that all was ready, the dinner would commence now. Please come now.

Between the first and second invitation, circumstances changed for the guests. They began to make excuses and send regrets. These are not lame excuses: "I was stuck in traffic; my alarm clock didn't go off; I forgot." In fact, in that culture, the economic exigencies of the first two guests, both new business ventures—a real estate investment, purchase of farm implements (5 yoke of oxen)—were honored and

accepted. It happened all the time. The third guest announced his or her recent marriage, an event so important that newlyweds were excused from military service in ancient Israel.

It is not the excuses that are surprising about the story Jesus told. It is the behavior of the host: go out into the streets and bring in people who never get invited to a banquet, people society has decided are not fit for polite company, people who know in their own hearts, because it has been drummed into them, that they are not acceptable—"the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."

And still the host is not finished. Still there are empty places at the table. "Go back out into the lanes and streets and compel people to come in."

This is a very different kind of host. This is a host whose generosity and graciousness are not contingent on anything in the potential guests. This is a host whose hospitality transcends every social barrier, every cultural custom that categorizes people as acceptable or unacceptable. This is a host whose eagerness to have guests at the table overcomes their own reluctance to come to dinner.

And that is a radical redefinition of religion and a radical new idea of God.

Harvey Cox in his reminiscence of the old revival hymn "Just as I Am" referred to Paul Tillich's famous sermon "You Are Accepted."

Tillich is regarded as one of the most important Protestant theologians and Christian intellects of the twentieth century. Exiled from Germany by the Nazis, Tillich taught at Union Seminary in New York, then Harvard, and, at the end of his career in the 1960s, at the University of Chicago. His lectures were open to the entire university and they were standing-room-only—in the largest auditorium on campus. Tillich's theology is notoriously complex. In addition to his three-volume *Systematic Theology*—more ministers own it than have read it—Tillich published three volumes of sermons. They are brief, simple, clear, and very precious. "The Shaking of the Foundation." "The New Being." "The Eternal Now."

Cox's reference sent me to the bookshelf to read again the famous sermon "You Are Accepted." It is a masterpiece. In it Tillich talks about sin and grace, two common and irreplaceable religious words. Sin, he argues, is a state of being before it is an act. When religion focuses on sins, instead of Sin, it always creates two categories of people—sinners and the righteous—and that's where religion goes off the tracks. Sin, singular, with a capital S, is the problem, Tillich said, and then he defined it, not as immoral acts, but as a state of separation from God, separation from self, separation from others.

The human condition, Tillich said, is not adequately described as immoral and evil, but as alienated and separated, aloneness, meaninglessness: "In every soul there is a sense of aloneness and separation" ("The Shaking of the Foundations," p.156).

Tillich's ideas not only reflect the radical biblical witness, but also what we know and experience as human beings. Sigmund Freud taught that, from infancy, we fear separation, first from parents and caregivers, and then friends and lovers and spouses. All our lives we live in anxiety produced by fear of separation.

Swiss physician and psychologist Paul Tourneir combined the best of Freud and Tillich in a ministry and practice that focused on human alienation and loneliness:

In Jesus Christ God has answered our loneliness and separation.

In Jesus Christ is our reunion with God and with self—and to the degree we live in that reunion, with others. In the truest sense, in Jesus Christ is our homecoming.

Alienation, exclusion, rejection are powerful human dynamics. As our culture tries once again to understand what causes an adolescent boy to take a gun to school and kill his classmates, one theme keeps emerging: teasing, bullying by other students, exclusion, humiliation. Charles Andrew Williams, the Columbine shooters, everybody recognizes in retrospect, were the brunt of teasing, alienation, separation. The *Tribune* last week reported that 75 percent of the shooters in thirty-seven separate incidents told other students ahead of time what they planned to do and that it was for revenge. And so schools are stepping up programs to "change a culture that divides students into a caste of insiders and outsiders and a blasé attitude by adults that dismisses bullying as a rite of passage" (*Chicago Tribune,* 12 March 2001).

Of course, it is not the only explanation. The ridiculously easy accessibility of a gun is a big part of it. But it is a reminder of the very real human pain that is caused by overt exclusion and separation—and the consequent unbelievable violence that sometimes results.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells about looking out at a full synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—the day Jews fast and pray that God will forgive—"men and women who attend no other service of the year attend this one. People who usually arrive halfway through one of our lengthy services make sure to come on time tonight," he observes.

When all is ready and all are seated, Rabbi Kushner nods to the cantor who chants:

"By consent of the authorities in heaven and on earth, we permit sinners to enter and be part of the congregation."

"People crowd into that service," Kushner says, "because they know their shortcomings and they need a word of forgiveness and acceptance" (*How Good Do We Have to Be?,* p. 1).

Religion doesn't need to come down hard on us, condemning our sins and warning of divine judgment. Most of us are well aware of our shortcomings. What religion ought to be about is addressing our alienation, our separation, our aloneness.

"You are accepted," Paul Tillich wrote. Whatever else is true about you, you are welcome in God's presence.

Sometimes that message comes in quiet ways, and sometimes not so quiet. A year or so ago I was being publicly and strongly criticized for my position on the issue that is so deeply dividing our church. My picture was featured prominently in the *Presbyterian Layman*, a right-wing newspaper with a circulation of about 500,000. Several articles criticized my position, my theology, and even some of the programs and speakers sponsored by Fourth Church. I was a little angry, resentful, and embarrassed. I found myself at a conference, in the middle of it all, attended by many people whom I knew read the *Layman* and are influenced by it. The conference coordinator, Ben Johnson, a professor at Columbia Seminary, an honest, gentle man who, so far as I know, may not agree with me either, asked me to say a few words. As I sat down beside him on the platform, I said, "Are you sure about this? I'm a marked man." Ben knew what I meant and he said, "Yes, you are a marked man. You are marked by your baptism. You are a child of God. You belong to Jesus Christ, and don't you forget it."

That's the real thing. That's gospel. You are a child of God; you belong to Jesus Christ and don't forget it.

Just as I am, without one plea.

I went back and read the sermon Paul Tillich preached. We know a lot more now about Paul Tillich's life than many of us wanted to know—about his moral lapses. Somehow it made his words more poignant and more important.

It is perhaps the most eloquent and powerful articulation of grace—anywhere.

Listen to it.

> Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we are estranged. . . . It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us. . . . Sometimes at that moment grace breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying, "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything: do not perform anything: do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us we experience grace.

And then the great theologian concluded:

> After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment grace conquers sin and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. ("You Are Accepted")

You and I are invited into the presence of the Most High. There is no question any longer of God's gracious welcome—only of our readiness and willingness. We are invited, each and every one of us, to the banquet. There is a place prepared for us, regardless of who we are. We are invited to the table of the Lamb of God.

> Just as I am, thy love unknown
> Has broken every barrier down;
> Now to be thine, yea thine alone,
> O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Amen.

Prayers of the People
March 18, 2001
By Carol J. Allen, Associate Pastor for Congregational Care

Holy God, out of your generosity you have given all good gifts. We thank you for all that nourishes our bodies and nurtures our spirits. We thank you for the turning of the seasons, the affection of friends, helpful new insights, satisfaction in work well done, opportunities to play, and the love of those with whom we live and with whom we worship. In these gifts, you give us clues to your presence in creation.

As full as we become, O God, there remains in us a quiet hunger. We thank you that you understand the deep longing with which we were born and that you have come among us as living bread, the only food that can satisfy this need. We yearn to be known in our innermost being and loved unconditionally. We see how in Jesus Christ you did not come to humiliate those who harbor some secret shame or who were never made to feel welcome or sure of their worth.* Redeemer God, you have come to hold out the sustenance of hope to those who flounder and fail when up against the limits of this life. You have come to save us from our sinfulness, from our broken ability to love ourselves and others as you love us.

Righteous God, you know well how harsh, unfeeling, and cruel this world can be. When tragedy strikes, when love leaves, when change threatens to overwhelm, our trust wavers and we are not sure that we will ever be full again. We busy ourselves with getting and keeping whatever promises to fill our emptiness. Continue to come to us in the living Christ, O God, to challenge our fuzzy thinking that we can truly live solely by our own efforts. Interrupt any of our actions that will not satisfy and may even do harm to ourselves or others. When we pursue "contentment without commitment" or present "a veneer of niceness in situations of injustice that require expression of outrage, help us to be whole persons, holy persons, well persons."**

Loving God, surround with your presence all who need your care this day. Cradle them as though a newborn child. Turn those battling with seductive temptations away from them with a firm hand. In their resistance and attempts to squirm away, do not let them go. Take unto yourself the tears of those in anguish and sadness, support those facing tough decisions and upcoming hard times, and tickle the spirits of those who are feeling joy until it spills over and enlivens those all around. "Lay hold of us, God, with firmness like that of a lover's embrace, with tenderness like that of a child when she cups a butterfly in her hands."** Despite all the distractions that turn us away from you, continue to invite us just as we are into your fullness, through Christ, who taught his followers to say together when they pray: Our Father . . .

**inspired by Janet Morley*
*** Glen Rainsley*